Kim Wells was recognized as the recipient of the 2020 NASFAA Leadership Award for the WASFAA region. Normally recognized at the NASFAA annual conference, WASFAA wanted to recognize Kim’s selection for this prestigious award by highlighting her in this article. NASFAA’s Regional Leadership Award is given to people who have exhibited high integrity and character, have shown creative leadership and have inspired and encouraged others to actively participate in professional development.

Ryan West recently sat down with Kim Wells (from a social distance of approximately 191 miles) to talk about her career, life and this award.

WASFAA: First, a hearty congratulations on your recent NASFAA Award for the WASFAA region! WASFAA is excited to see you recognized for your contributions to financial aid, WASFAA and beyond! You've been in the financial aid arena awhile now. Can you take us through your work experience in the field?

Wells: Oh goodness. Are you saying I’m old? Lol. I started in 1996 as a temporary worker in the financial aid office at Western Oregon University (then Western Oregon State College). My “dream job” of working as a paid intern for the California State legislature didn’t come through and I had no Plan B. So as I was walking by the job announcements board on the 3rd floor of the Admin building, I saw a posting for a financial aid counselor position in the Financial Aid Office. With absolutely no other prospects, I decided to give it a whirl. Immediately after graduation, I interviewed, they liked me (shocking, I know) and I was offered a temporary position with the hopes that when another staff member retired in a few months, I would be interested in applying for that person’s permanent position. I was, I did and they hired me permanently a few months later. The rest is history.
My entire professional career has been in the financial aid industry. I worked at WOU for about 18 months and then had the chance to apply for a job with the U.S. Department of Education in Seattle, working for the Direct Loan program (which I had administered at WOU). I applied, got hired and thus began my career as a “fed.” I worked for the DL program for about three years from 1997 – 2000 and then took a job working for a guarantor called EdFund in the state of California. Once again on the move, I headed down to the Sacramento area where I worked for EdFund as a financial aid training specialist and then a client relations manager for about five years. In that time, I also relocated to Spokane, WA and then over to the Seattle metropolitan area. In 2006 (I think) I left EdFund to work for Student Capital Corporation, which was a division of College Loan Corporation. That was my one experience working for a lender. About a year later I returned to EdFund as a client relations manager again, where I remained until life happened and I got laid off in November 2009.

Later that month, I was rehired with the U.S. Department of Education/Federal Student Aid and returned to the “feds” where I currently remain. I started back in the Application Processing Division, which handles all of the application processing, so it’s very appropriately named. Lol. I moved to DC for that job and while that was quite the adventure, I was able to quickly return back to the Seattle area for a job as a training officer, still with FSA. I continued as a training officer from 2010 until 2018, when I had an opportunity to move over to the FAFSA team, which is where I currently am. My official title is “Management and Program Analyst,” which is a very governmental way of saying that I attend meetings. Ha ha. The team I’m on is responsible for the FAFSA form in all its variations – PDF, fafsa.gov and the mobile app. The work is incredibly interesting, my team is phenomenal and I enjoy going to work most days.

WASFAA: What have been some of your favorite activities or experiences in the financial aid profession?

Wells: Some of my favorite memories have been the opportunities I’ve had to meet people from all over the country through my jobs and attending conferences. When I was a trainer for EdFund, we traveled in pairs mostly, so having the opportunity to travel the country, provide financial aid training, and do it with people who are not only your colleagues but also your friends was a pretty incredible experience. Through work, I’ve been able to travel to places like Guam, Hawaii, Puerto Rico and even Australia. Lest anyone think it was all glamorous, I also went to many far less exotic locations. All for work.
WASFAA: What does a typical day look like in your current role? What is it that you do?

Wells: The universal financial aid answer is so fitting for this – it depends! Lol. This might not be the best time to ask me about a typical day, as we’re doing testing for the FAFSA feature of the myStudentAid mobile app. So lately, my day has been full of executing test cases, ensuring the app is going to function like it’s supposed to. But when I’m not doing that, I spend a lot of my day in meetings and responding to emails. The FAFSA form is actually a quite complex creature. Particularly when over 99% of our applicants file the form electronically. Our development cycle for the form is usually 12-18 months in advance. So if you think about that, for a 2021-22 startup on 10/01/20, that means that our team has been working on the 2021-22 FAFSA form since approximately April 2019. There’s a development lifecycle that includes things like visioning, requirements (documentation about what the website, form and app are all supposed to do), reviewing of requirements documentation, providing input and feedback (and ultimately approval) of the design, managing the development of the product, testing that the product is ready for production, implementing the product and then managing the operation and maintenance of the product. The team that I’m on, which is a small but mighty team of four staff members, a team lead and then a director and deputy director, handles all of these tasks and then some. We’re not that different than a financial aid office – continually being asked to do more with less.

WASFAA: Tell us a little about where you live and how you like to spend your time when not in the office working on financial aid?

Wells: I live in a beautiful area of the country – Puyallup, WA. When I’m not busy working, I love to be outside exploring the northwest, or really anywhere. I run, hike, spend time with my husband and our adorable Golden Retriever, Kinley. I love to travel, although my ability to do really any travel has been suspended, like everyone else’s, since late February. My husband and I have recently embarked on a complete kitchen remodel, doing most of the work (except plumbing & electrical) ourselves. That will include laying new hardwood floors, hanging cabinets, doing all the demo work, etc. So I’ve been learning a lot about kitchens, cabinets, and general construction. And by “learning” I mean listening to my husband who is a carpenter and a foreman. So I truly have been learning from a master!

WASFAA: What has been the most challenging and least challenging things for you while learning to work during a pandemic?
Wells: I think the most challenging has been the inability to get out and really spend time with external people while being stuck at home for such a long period of time. I love working from home and have done it very successfully over many years of my career. But I always had the outlet of getting to travel or having the ability to see my friends and family. With that taken away, I’ve had to be creative in figuring out how to get that quality time with people, even when we can’t be together in person. But I suspect that’s the case for a lot of us right now. Least challenging for me? Learning to work from home. I love working from home for several reasons – and I find that I’m more productive when working from home, which I hope is a win win for me and my employer both.

WASFAA: What advice would you give to someone just beginning a career in financial aid?

Wells: Ooh – that’s a tough one. I think that the financial aid professional is so noble and the people who are in it don’t choose it, it really chooses them. I still remember when I first started working in the financial aid office at WOU, I was told that it would take about a year before most of what I was learning would make any sense. But that at the end of that first year, pieces of the financial aid puzzle would start to fall into place. And you know what? That was right. That first year was a doozy. But after that, things started to make more sense, even when they didn’t make sense. And that’s when I knew I was hooked. So I guess my advice would be to stick out that first year. Learn as much as you can and take lots of notes. Attend training if possible. And at the end of that first year, while it won’t always make sense, you’ll find that you understand how all the pieces fit together and then you can make a determination if this is the right career fit. And keep your sense of humor. And learn some good jokes. And lean on your financial aid colleagues when needed. They’re an incredibly caring and genuine group of people.

WASFAA: Are there any funny or embarrassing stories you’d like to share with our readers from your time as a training officer?

Wells: So – funny that you should ask this. One of my most embarrassing stories is from an OASFAA conference. I don’t remember the year (I try to block it out). I was a training officer and attending the OASFAA conference at the beautiful Salishan Lodge to provide updates from the “feds.” It was the year that the asset threshold question was introduced to fafsa.gov. In our training materials development, we had all joked about how hard it is to properly say asset threshold. So at my appointed time, I started giving my Federal Update presentation to the crowd (it was probably 180 people or so). I kept saying in my head to remember to properly say asset threshold. So when I got to that slide and began my talking...
points, I managed to take the first part of the word asset and the last part of the word threshold and combine them to say asshold. What followed after that was, logically, the remainder of the two words. Threshhet. So yes, I said asshold threshet in front of the entire population of the OASFAA conference that year. I honestly don’t even remember my reaction. I’m pretty sure that I laughed. As did every single person in that room. For minutes. Like 500 minutes. Lol. That might be a *slight* exaggeration. But when you’re standing in front of a crowd of people and have just unintentionally said a word that sounds very much like a swear word, time slows to an absolute crawl. At some point several years later, I recovered and was able to continue on with my presentation.

I’m pretty sure that will go down in the annals of OASFAA lore.

WASFAA: Is there anything else you’d like to share with our readers?

Wells: My time serving the WASFAA community has been incredible. I have been so fortunate to meet so many people from OASFAA, WFAA, CASFAA, PacFAA, ALASFAA, IASFAA, NAFAA, AASFAA, WASFAA . . . all the FAAs and SFAAs. Lol. To be honored by WASFAA with such a distinguished award is incredibly humbling. Honestly, I just do my job.

One of the things I remember when I first started in the financial aid arena was that FSA (at the time, SFA) didn’t have a great reputation. People in the community were either scared of getting a program review or they weren’t treated very nicely when they did reach out to SFA. It was an honor to be able to be in the financial aid community and be welcomed with open arms to WASFAA and everyone that I came in contact with. Some of my very best friends on the planet I’ve met through the financial aid community. Thank you all. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you for bringing me into your world and allowing me to be a part of it with you. For allowing me to walk alongside you and navigate some rough waters together. For allowing me to represent my employer and still be human at the same time. For laughing at my really really corny jokes (which I still love, BTW). For supporting me and cheering me on in whatever crazy professional endeavors I sought. For being a place and a community that I couldn’t wait to visit again. Thank you doesn’t begin to describe my gratitude for the kindness you all have so generously shown me.

Congratulations, Kim!